

Those Ten Minutes Left!

By Verónica de la Vega

We have all been young, fresh, hurried teachers at some point in our professional lives. There are times when an exercise turns out to be shorter than we thought, or we discover that our students have suddenly become desperate “task eaters.” Whatever the cause might be, even the most relaxed professional checks the clock in panic from time to time. Rather than panicking, we should treat the five to ten minutes left as an opportunity to give our students extra doses of motivation. Here is an opportunity to play, review, and show the students why you love English. The following are some fun ideas about how to capitalize on time gaps:

1. An experienced teacher once told me, “Always keep a picture, comic strip, or drawing at hand.” You can use them for multiple activities, such as a discussion about the subject represented by that image, or an impromptu role-play of the situation, or perhaps a description using relative clauses, etc.
2. Play a short session of an oral game like “animal, vegetable, mineral” (yes/no questions), “charades” (mime the word), “Simon says” (TPR commands), “I spy...” (common objects), or others.
3. Recycle a topic for revision. For example, write a list of verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, or any other topic covered in previous classes, and have your students formulate sentences using them—maybe in a two-team competition.
4. Keep a stock of short poems suitable for the class level and group age. Read and/or write one or two, and analyze and comment on the poem just for pleasure. This could be followed up with an exercise to create a poem reproducing the same pattern.
5. Practice your storytelling skills. Create a pool of stories you can refer to when needed, and choose one either to read or tell. Assign basic questions beforehand, such as who the characters are, where and when the story takes place, and what the plot is. If your class level is too low for this kind of exercise, tell a popular, widely known story, a fable or folk tale—and ask your students to discover which one it is by writing the name on a piece of paper. This way all students have a chance to guess.
6. Organize a brainstorming session for tasks to put in practice in the following weeks or months. Ask your students to give ideas for a special project or group activity. Write a list of proposals and have everybody vote afterwards. If you find the winning suggestions hard to accomplish, brainstorm again for ways to implement them.
7. Introduce journals/portfolios—if your students do not keep them already—to collect sample work. Suggest an initial entry like their own profile, including daily routines, interests, habits, skills, or other aspects. Keep close control by detailing items students should cover before starting the activity. If you have been using journals, and time is really short, ask your students to revise their work, maybe even share an entry with another classmate in order to exchange opinions on particular subjects.
8. Taking into account the class level, vocabulary and structures already taught during the course, write 10 headless sentences (“...is used to put flowers in.”), or 10 tailless sentences (“A vase is used to...”). Have two or more teams complete the sentences in

three or four minutes. Finally, ask the students to read their answers aloud and correct any mistakes.

9. Select a category or topic from a varied list containing: seasons, months, colors, family, clothes, nationalities, professions, places, kitchen objects, literature, animals, food items, stationery, etc. Organize a “popcorn competition,” where students have to provide a word associated with the category. The teacher chooses somebody to start the game. The order is suggested by the players who have to call any student’s name after they give an answer—the way corn pops in any direction. If the answer is not correct or no word is provided after 10 seconds, the player is out of the game for the time being, and another category is selected until only one student remains.
10. Select a category or topic from a varied list containing: seasons, months, colors, family, clothes, nationalities, professions, places, kitchen objects, literature, animals, food items, stationery, etc. Organize a “popcorn competition,” where students have to provide a word associated with the category. The teacher chooses somebody to start the game. The order is suggested by the players who have to call any student’s name after they give an answer—the way corn pops in any direction. If the answer is not correct or no word is provided after 10 seconds, the player is out of the game for the time being, and another category is selected until only one student remains.
11. Write a simple sentence like “Today is a beautiful day.” Your students will have to expand it in turns, by adding one or two words together in any place. If someone suggests a sentence which is incorrect, write the new sentence anyway and have the class decide if it is correct or not. Continue as time or space permits. With three minutes left, follow the same method to reduce the resulting sentence to a minimum expression.

These are just a few ideas collected here and there—mostly passed on by other colleagues. You may have heard of them through another source, but the real issue is to try them out. I suggest starting working with a checklist like the one here, and you will probably come out with a lot of interesting exercises and games. Start a list of your own today, keep it at hand, and make it grow! Maybe you will discover gaps in time are worth creating after all.

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